

2004

Book Review of "Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape", edited by Paul A. Shackel

Sherene Baugher

Follow this and additional works at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha>

 Part of the [Archaeological Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baugher, Sherene (2004) "Book Review of "Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape", edited by Paul A. Shackel," *Northeast Historical Archaeology*: Vol. 33 33, Article 13.
<https://doi.org/10.22191/neha/vol33/iss1/13> Available at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha/vol33/iss1/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Northeast Historical Archaeology by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

Book Reviews

MYTH, MEMORY, AND THE MAKING OF THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE, edited by Paul A. Shackel, 2001, University of Florida Press, Gainesville, Foreword by Edward T. Linenthal, 286 pages, 39 figures, \$59.95 (cloth), \$24.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Sherene Baugher.

Paul Shackel's edited volume, *Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape*, is a "must read" for anyone interested in cultural landscape studies, museum studies, and public history. Even though a number of the authors are archaeologists, this reader is not primarily about archaeological sites and the interpretation of archaeological data. The focus is on how important historical places have been interpreted to the public and why those interpretations have changed over time.

Americans are used to commemorating sites of battlefields, cemeteries, birthplaces and homes of the rich and famous, and sites of famous historic events. With the hundredth anniversary of the Revolutionary War Americans focused with pride on their unique heritage. In the late 19th century as Nationalism grew in the western world, Americans also commemorated their history with statues and plaques. In the 1920s, many states put up roadside markers at the sites of important historic events. During the 1930s, especially the work of the CCC, National, State, County, and Municipal Parks were created and sometimes they preserved significant sites. These preserved sites have become important symbols on the American landscape. But who decides what should be commemorated? Who decides on the wording on the plaques? Whose history is highlighted? And conversely, whose past is ignored? These are questions the authors of this volume tackle.

As editor, Paul Shackel has chosen a variety of sites (12 in all), many of them owned by the National Park Service. Some of the sites are controversial landscapes, such as the Wounded Knee, Manassas, or Manzanar, the

Japanese-American Internment camp. Other sites are connected with famous Americans such as the birthplaces of Washington and Lincoln. And many are associated with our patriotic past, such as Antietam Battlefield, the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial, and Arlington cemetery.

The interpretations at these memorial landscapes represent conflicting stories of class, race, ethnicity, and gender. At all 12 sites, selective stories of the past are being told. The twelve authors discuss how and why the interpretations of the sites have changed over time. They analyze who has controlled and created these historic messages at our public monuments. They probe into the tensions between people with and without power as diverse groups seek to have their stories told at these highly visible landmarks. The authors evaluate the roles of diverse players including, park service personnel, archaeologists, historic preservationists, corporate leaders, Congressional leaders, landowners, community groups, and minority groups in the quest for control over public history.

People learn about the past from classes, books, art, literature, movies, family, friends, museums, historic sites, and government ceremonies. In creating what Shackel calls, a community or country's "collective memory," there is often a struggle between competing interest groups. Shackel reminds readers that this battle to control the interpretation of the past is on-going. He notes that for the last twenty years, the government has played a major role in trying to create a conservative agenda for public history:

William Bennett and Lynne Cheney served as chairs of the National Endowment for the Humanities from the early 1980s through 1992. They discouraged funding projects that encouraged a pluralist view of the past. They sharply curtailed any projects dealing with women, labor, or racial groups, or any project that might conflict with the national collective memory (Shackel, p. 13).

By providing a limited historical view, the past becomes sanitized. In fact, Shackel notes

that some of the public history presented at these national sites is more myth than reality. And all of the authors discuss the constant high-stakes battles to control our country's "collective memory."

Shackel has divided the book into three parts: Exclusionary Past; Commemoration and the Making of a Patriotic Past; and Nostalgia and the Legitimation of American Heritage. He provides introductions to each section and tries to show how each article is tied to a common theme or to underpinning ideas. However, these themes are interwoven throughout the book and articles from one section do include themes from another section.

In the "Exclusionary Past," the articles focus on sites "where the meaning of the landscape is controlled by a dominant group" (Shackel, p. 19). Shackel notes that subordinate groups must live in what he calls as "state of 'two-ness,'" that is, they have had to endure seeing only one interpretation of their sites, the version the government has presented to the public, while they know another version of their history exists. The articles in this section are on: African-Americans (Erika Martin Seibert), Asian-Americans (Janice Dubel), Native Americans (Gale Brown), displaced Appalachians (Audrey Horning), and women (Courtney Workman). The articles describe the struggles of minorities fighting to have "the other history" told, and a good example is Janice Dubel's excellent article on the Japanese-American plight at Manzanar.

The second section, "Commemoration and the Making of a Patriotic Past," covers articles on Antietam Battlefield (Martha Temkin), the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial on Boston Common (Paul Shackel), and Arlington National Cemetery including the Robert E. Lee memorial (Laurie Burgess). Why are some of the stories fading and others gaining new meaning? For example, Shackel's article focuses on how the meaning, significance, and interpretation of a monument (the Shaw memorial) changed over time. Shaw and members of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry were depicted in the film *Glory*. Today the monument is referred to as the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry. Some critics claim the monument is racist while others feel it depicts the forgotten soldiers especially the bravery of the free Blacks as well as honoring the abolitionist Shaw. Shackel skillfully chronicles the

changing and contrasting meanings of this monument.

In the "Quest for Nostalgia," Shackel (pp. 9-12) notes that a false past is created by eliminating those events that record disharmony and injustice such as labor strikes. Matthew Palus tells how John D. Rockefeller, Jr. used nostalgia as a tool to segregate classes in Acadia National Park. Erin Donovan's article on Camden Yards in Baltimore discusses how the dark industrial history of the site is forgotten in the quest to memorialize baseball. The quest for nostalgia can also be found in the birthplaces of presidents, sites that can be used to evoke a feeling of patriotism and pride in our national heritage. However, the question of "authenticity" is raised in regard to two sites, Lincoln's log cabin (Dwight Pitcaithley) and Washington's birthplace (Joy Beasley); both sites have more than questionable histories.

One of the themes that run through many of the articles is that sites should not be frozen. Many times a landscape or building may have been the site of one very important historic event, and this event forever marks its history. For example, Martha Temkin discusses the controversy to "freeze-frame" Antietam battlefield. Do you eliminate all the 19th-century memorials put up after the war by soldiers in memory of their fallen comrades? The issue of interpreting one time or many time periods has been an on-going discussion in both museum studies and historic preservation and many professionals believe that while you do not eliminate the "other histories," they should be are told as "side bars" so that the visitor knows that there was a history at the site before and after the critical event, but without overshadowing the key historical event. The articles in this book address how much of the "other history" is currently being told.

"Freeze-framing" is not the only way to eliminate the "other history." Audrey Horning notes that Shenandoah National Park is presented to the public as a natural landscape, which allows the federal government to omit the stories of the people who transformed these "natural" landscapes, starting with the Native Americans, continuing with "the hard-scrabble 18th-century frontier settlement" and the poverty of the late-19th- and early-20th-

century Appalachians (Horning p. 24). In fact, many of the National Park "natural" landscapes probably have Native American sites buried below the post-contact layers. Also, readers must remember that the National Park Service is not the only agency that omits human history from the interpretation of "natural" landscapes; managers and decision makers in many of our state and county parks also continue to share this attitude.

For the most part the articles are well written and informative. Some of the authors, Joy Beasley, Audrey Horning, and Erika Seibert, use archaeological data to support their evidence for the history of the underrepresented groups. For example, Horning provides specific examples of how archaeological findings can enhance, expand, change, and challenge the prevailing interpretations of an historic landscape. Other authors weave data from primary and secondary sources and interviews to tell their story. In analyzing historical memorials on our American landscape Dwight Pitcaithley (p. 252) notes, "Our collective heritage is as much memory as fact, as much myth as reality, as much perception as preservation." All the authors reveal the complex and hidden history of their landscapes. Paul Shackel accurately summarizes the findings of all of the authors by stating "the making of heroic symbols on the American landscape is never static, as they are continually being negotiated and reconstructed" (p.13).

Sherene Baugher is an associate professor at Cornell University in the Department of Landscape Architecture. She is also the Director of Cornell's Archaeology Program. From 1980 to 1990, she served as the first official archaeologist for the City of New York. Her research interests focus on ethnicity and class issues especially in relationship to cultural landscape studies. She is also very committed to the interpretation of archaeological sites to the public and is co-editing a book with John Jameson on *Past Meets Present: Partnerships in the Public Interpretation of Archaeology*.

Sherene Baugher, Associate Professor,
Director, the Cornell Archaeology Program
Cornell University,
261 McGraw Hall,
Ithaca, New York 14853.
(607) 255-9552, sbb8@cornell.edu.

UNEARTHING GOTHAM: THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF NEW YORK CITY, by Anne-Marie Cantwell and Diana diZerega Wall, 2001, Yale University Press, New Haven. 374 pages, \$ 39.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by Nancy J. Brighton.

Recently, a local newswoman hosted a television program about New York City "underground." Rather than highlighting its nightlife, the audience became privy to the secrets of what lies beneath the city's famed streets—eight stories of multi-level subway lines, sewer lines, fiber optic cables, power lines, basements of skyscrapers and, at the very bottom, its infamous water tunnels. With all of this disturbance, it is difficult to imagine there would be any room left for the unique, often extensive, archaeological sites that have been uncovered around the city. But as *Unearthing Gotham* demonstrates, there is over 11,000 years of prehistory and history represented by artifacts and archaeological remains that have been recovered from beneath these same city streets.

The authors, anthropology professors and archaeologists Anne-Marie Cantwell of Rutgers University, and Diana DiZerega Wall of the City University of New York, approach the entire city as a single archaeological site examined through time, using individual archaeological projects as components of the larger site. Cantwell and Wall use this archaeological data to study the various groups that lived in New York City, including those who lived here before there was a city. Their study tells the story of people and the way they changed the land to create the urban landscape. Cantwell and Wall's approach "provides a unique opportunity to contribute significantly to the ongoing creation of New York's identity and to the broader national one as well" (p. 4).

Unearthing Gotham is divided into four sections, each of which is further divided into chapters. Section One briefly describes the legislative context of doing archaeology in the United States in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and the influence of federal law on the development of New York City's own City Environmental Quality Review (CEQR), which includes a con-